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Affairs of State, by Stewart Alsop

...cNamara: the light that failed

WASHINGTON:

Desmond FitzGerald, a deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, who died of a heart attack recently at the age of 57, was one of the best professional intelligence men this country has produced. Back in the era when only U.S. "advisers" were involved in the Vietnamese war, it was his job to brief Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara on the war.

Every week FitzGerald would come into McNamara's huge Pentagon office at the appointed hour, to find McNamara surrounded by charts and tables of statistics which "quantified" the progress of the war. FitzGerald would summarize that week's intelligence input, while McNamara took notes in his tiny handwriting, occasionally interjecting an incisive, factual question. One day FitzGerald asked McNamara if he could make a personal comment, and McNamara nodded.

"Mr. Secretary," FitzGerald said, "facts and figures are useful, but you can't judge a war by them. You have to have an instinct, a feel. My instinct is that we're in for a much rougher time than your facts and figures indicate."

"You really think that?" McNamara asked.

"Yes, I do," said FitzGerald.

"But why?" said McNamara.

"It's just an instinct, a feeling," said FitzGerald.

McNamara gave him a long, incredulous stare. It was, FitzGerald later recalled, rather as though he had said something utterly and obviously mad. McNamara said good-bye politely, but that was the last time FitzGerald was ever summoned to his Pentagon office.

No man is flawless, and this small episode from the past precisely defines the flaw in Robert McNamara. McNamara is, in this reporter's opinion, a great public servant. He has to his credit two towering achievements for which the United States is deeply in his debt.

He is the first Secretary of Defense with the ability, experience, and just plain guts to bring the vast, sprawling, hideously bureaucratic U.S. Defense establishment under effective civilian control. He is also the first Secretary of Defense to face up squarely to the grim fact that the nuclear weapon is an inherently irrational instrument of power, since it is a suicidal instrument; and to draw the necessary strategic conclusions from that fact. McNamara's speech in September, in which he discussed those conclusions, was a genuinely brilliant intellectual exercise and a major historical document. Yet for all his brilliance, McNamara is in bad trouble, and he knows it.

Partly he is in trouble because he provides a convenient scapegoat. But he is also in trouble partly because he has lacked that "instinct," that "feeling," which Desmond FitzGerald had, and which McNamara so disdained.

There are powerful forces in this country that badly need a scapegoat. With his dangerous compulsion to tell the truth as he sees it, McNamara has repeatedly told Congress (to quote *The New York Times*) that the vast weight of bombs on North Vietnam has "not significantly affected North Vietnam's war-making capability nor seriously deterred the flow of men and materials to Communist-led forces in South Vietnam."

Saying this is like hitting the powerful advocates of the air-power legend in the face with a large, red rag. The air-power legend holds that air power is *the* decisive instrument of war. The legend accounts for the fact that for years the U.S. Air Force, plus the Navy Air Arm, has regularly spent the lion's share of every defense dollar. It also accounts for the fact that the air-power advocates are the most powerful spokesmen of what Dwight Eisenhower called "the military-industrial complex."

Now the war in Vietnam is proving all over again, only more vividly, what World War II and Korea proved twice over—that air power, strategic nuclear war aside, is an indispensable but subsidiary military instrument. Underlining this point in testimony like that quoted above is hardly calculated to endear McNamara to the air-power advocates.

The war in Vietnam is proving once again that "wars are won bloodily, on the ground, not cleanly, in the air" (to quote a report in this space on the Vietnamese war more than two years ago). But the war is not being won—or not very rapidly—on the ground either, despite the commitment of more than half a million men and the spending of more than 20 billion dollars a year. As the sense of frustration and disillusion with the war mounts, the need for a scapegoat mounts with it. McNamara has clearly been nominated for that role.

Much of the current assault on McNamara is specious and self-serving. Yet McNamara is vulnerable to honest criticism too. His judgment on the war has twice been dangerously wrong.

In the early "advisory" era of the war, McNamara interpreted his facts and figures to mean

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that our side was winning the war. He was wrong. After that fact became obvious, and U.S. troops were committed to prevent total defeat, McNamara concluded, on the basis of impeccable logic, that it would only be necessary to persuade the Communists that "they can't win in the South." Then, "we presume that they will move to a settlement." He was wrong again.

He was wrong, at least in part, because of that disdain for "instinct" and "feeling" which is so much a part of the man. Unlike Desmond Fitz-Gerald, who had a magnificent combat record in the Second World War, McNamara has nothing in his personal experience to teach him what war is really like—an Air Force logistics expert, which McNamara was in that war, does not learn much about war's harsh realities. One of war's realities is that running a war is not like running the Ford Company. War is an essentially unreasonable and illogical pursuit. It cannot be "quantified" because there are too many human and other imponderables involved. There is no way to quantify, for example, the totally irrational determination of the Communist side in Vietnam to fight on, when all McNamara's facts and figures point to the conclusion that Ho Chi Minh and Company should have "moved to a settlement" long ago.

McNamara has an almost Calvinistic horror of emotion, an almost mystical reverence for reason. *All* correct decisions, he has often said, must be made "on the basis of reason, not emotion." But reason has been, for Robert McNamara, the light that failed.

McNamara is certainly a troubled man. He has seriously discussed with close friends—including Sen. Robert Kennedy—whether or not he ought to resign. His friends have pointed out that he would be resigning under fire, on no clear and decisive issue, with the war still dragging on. Moreover, he is desperately needed where he is. So far, such arguments have prevailed, and Robert McNamara has been persuaded that he ought to stay where he is as long as the President wants him.

McNamara is not a man who wears his heart on his sleeve. But he is a deeply sensitive man, behind the brisk exterior, and he hates, above all other things, to be wrong. One senses that he knows his light has failed, and that its failure troubles him far more deeply than all the harsh things the generals and the senators are saying about him.

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